

Archeological Evidence of Religious Syncretism in Thasos, Greece during the Early Christian Period

Valerie C. COOPER

The University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA, U.S.A.

Introduction

In antiquity, Thasos enjoyed a rich variety of natural resources. Consequently, the island experienced waves of immigration, commerce and invasion. The historical record suggests that these resulted in a diverse and notably tolerant populace. Thasos presents a remarkable point of study on the question of religious syncretism. In a milieu noted for its religious tolerance, can evidence of religious syncretism be documented?

In this essay, I will examine the archeological records pertaining to two sites on the island of Thasos, each of which had been occupied from the pre-Christian to the early Christian periods. I will provide background information regarding these two sites, as well as the general history of the island, and specific information regarding a particular architectural artifact, the basilica, which will be examined at each site. Finally, I will consider evidence to substantiate the claim that early Christian communities on the island sought proximity to pre-Christian sites for the construction of their basilicas.

On Thasos, Christian communities re-used pagan religious sites in an effort not to eradicate their worship, but to align themselves with the prestige of pre-existing ancestor cult practices. Because hero worship was so important on the island, and so centrally linked to civic virtue, the Christians on Thasos re-appropriated sites (particularly at Evraiocastro) or forms (such as the double sanctuaries at Alikí) which linked them to the glorious, mythic past of the region. Such syncretistic appropriation was not unique on the island, nor was it unusual

in the history of Christianity. Indeed, on Thasos, as in other places, ancient, pagan hero worship contributed to later, Christian practices of martyr veneration.

Physical Description of Thasos

Thasos is an island situated at the northern edge of the Aegean Sea. Smaller than Rhodes or Mytilene, but larger than Samothrace, it is 398 square kilometers in circumference. Mount Hypsarion, located near its center, is its highest point at 1203 meters. The island was dotted with settlements in antiquity and into the present, including the main city, also called Thasos,¹ which was located on the northern face of the island, opposite the mainland and enclosed by a wall of approximately 4 km, and smaller communities, like Aliko, which was founded on the southern peninsula of the island, adjacent to the main marble quarries. As a port, Thasos was strategically located near Thrace and Macedonia, on important trade routes linking Asia Minor and the islands of the Eastern Aegean. Besides rich stands of timber and vegetation, the island boasted marble quarries and gold mines. As the quarries provided building materials for temples and monuments, so the timber provided lumber for home- and ship-building. Gold, silver, iron, lead, copper and chromite deposits were also exploited from antiquity as were the semiprecious stones amethyst and opal. Thasian olive oil and wine were also important sources of revenue during antiquity.

Historical Overview

Archeological evidence suggests that Thasos has been inhabited since the Neolithic period (4500-300 BCE). After the earliest settlers arrived, probably from Thrace, subsequent waves of immigrants and explorers arrived from Paros (an island from the Cyclades group) and Phoenicia from the end of the 8th century BCE onward.² According to tradition, the island takes its name from Thasos, the leader of a group of Phoenician traders who were exploiting the gold mines of the island in the Early Iron Age when the island was inhabited by a Thracian tribe. Around 680 BCE, Ionian Greeks from Paros successfully col-

¹ This city is today known as Limenas.

² <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Thasos&object=Site&redirect=true>.

onized Thasos. The island reached its greatest prosperity during the Archaic and early Classical period, as attested by many of the important buildings and sanctuaries dating from that time, and particularly by the city wall enclosing the main settlement on the island, also called Thasos, in antiquity. The wall was constructed at the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th century BCE.

Thasos island enjoyed abundant natural beauty, a strategic location 8 km off of the coast of Thrace and near important trade routes, and a wealth of material resources. At the height of its political power, the city-state controlled regions of the adjacent Thracian coast. In about 525 BCE, silver coins minted on the island first began to be circulated; coinage continued until the time of the Emperor Geta.³ Revenues from mints permitted the construction of a large naval and merchant fleet, the city wall, a harbor, and several significant shrines and public buildings. However, as the Archaic period ended, the region's prosperity was diminished by the Persian Wars; in 491 and 481 BCE Thasos submitted to Persian rule (under Darius I and Xerxes I, respectively). Early in the classical period, Thasos enjoyed another period of prosperity which ended in 465 BCE. In 477, it joined the Athenian-controlled Delian League, although it made unsuccessful attempts to elude Athenian dominance in 464 and 411 BCE. In 377 it joined the Second Athenian league.⁴

By the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Thasos had little political power but continued to experience periods of prosperity and regional importance. Hoddinott indicates that although Thasos had (by the late Roman and early Byzantine periods) lost control over profitable colonial possessions on Thrace and Macedonia, "it was still wealthy."⁵ Of the Byzantine period, however, it is not known positively whether Thasos was sacked by the Vandals along with much of the Greek mainland in 467-468 CE. Nevertheless, the island suffered under successive waves of invasion and piracy which reached their peak during the 7th through the 9th centuries. Subsequently, Thasos was successively ruled by the Ottoman Empire (1455-1813), Egypt (1813-1902) and the Turks (1902-

³ D. LAZARIDIS, *Thasos and Its Peraia* (Athens: Athens Center of Ekistics, 1971), p. 42. Geta ruled from 209 to 212 CE.

⁴ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Thasos&object=Site&redirect=true>.

⁵ Ralph F. HODDINOTT, *Early Byzantine Churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia; A Study of the Origins and the Initial Development of East Christian Art* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 183.

1912). Today, the island is a part of the nation of Greece.

The city-state of Thasos had everything. Its wealth attracted trade, visitation and political interest. According to Hippocrates, the father of Greek medicine, who spent three years on the island, working on his book, *Epidemics*, the island boasted a climate that was usually mild. "Winter was like spring," he wrote of his first year there.⁶ Attestations to the island's importance and prosperity dot the ancient sources. For example, the 2nd century CE Greek traveler and geographer, Pausanias, wrote of the use of Thasian marble in Athenian building.⁷ Thucydides wrote his history there while exiled from Athens during the 5th century BCE. Brutus and Cassius made Thasos their base of operations for the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE. In addition to its material wealth, high culture, natural and architectural beauty, Thasos imagined for itself a mythic past. According to local legend, it was the hero Herakles⁸ who provoked the Parian, Telesikles, father of the poet Archilochos, to annex the island. The Herakleion, the largest sanctuary on the island, indicated the significance of the cult associated with the hero/god Herakles, who was in turn associated with the island's mythic past. We will return later to the question of the role of hero-worship, and its significance to later Christian practice on the island, later in this paper.

Both the basilica of Evraiocastro, located outside of the ancient city walls of Thasos (Limenas) on the northern edge of the island, as well as the twin basilicas at Aliko to the south, point to the practice of retaining and reusing sacred sites. In this essay, we will first discuss the nature and development of the basilica as an architectural artifact of early Christianity, examine the archeological findings relative to Evraiocastro and Aliko, and then consider the possibility of religious syncretism in the reuse of pagan sites on Thasos during the early Christian period.

⁶ Hippocrates, *Epidemics I*, Loeb Edition, p. 147.

⁷ Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece*, 1.18.6.

⁸ This name is often anglicized as Hercules.

⁹ Richard KRAUTHEIMER, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 41.

The Basilica as Architectural Artifact

“Since the second and first centuries [BCE], basilicas had been built all through the Roman world.”⁹ Derived from the Greek *basilike*, for “king’s hall,”¹⁰ its earliest meaning was a large meeting hall which might serve any number of civic purposes. Later adaptations added a narthex, or vestibule, to this aisled hall, or nave, which often ended in a semi-circular apse. The earliest house churches, such as that found at Dura-Europa,¹¹ were succeeded, from the 4th century of the common era onward, by the basilica. Later innovations produced a cruciform church where the nave was bisected by the transept. Larger and more elaborate than the house church, the basilica demonstrated the emergence of Christians into the social milieu after the religion received official Roman recognition Emperor Galerius’ Edict of Toleration in 311 CE and the subsequent Edict of Milan under Constantine in 313 CE.

Why did the basilica become the template of choice for these early church buildings? According to L. Michael White, although influenced by contemporaneous, 4th century CE development of the layout of the synagogue, the distinctive basilica design confirmed that Christianity had developed a separate identity from Judaism.¹² Robert Milburn believes that the choice of the basilica for early church buildings also represented a rejection of other architectural forms more closely identified with pagan worship,¹³ although J. G. Davies points out that at least one classical temple was converted into a church, as in the case of the transition of the temple of Athena at Syracuse into the cathedral of Syracuse.¹⁴

Why then the basilica? Ward-Perkins notes that although the basilica as

¹⁰ Robert MILBURN, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 86; John B. WARD-PERKINS, *Roman Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977), p. 20.

¹¹ L. Michael WHITE, *Building God’s House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 7. This house-church, identified in 1931, can be securely dated to 256 CE, making it the earliest pre-Constantinian church building yet discovered.

¹² WHITE, p. 8.

¹³ MILBURN, p. 86.

¹⁴ J. G. DAVIES, *Temples, Churches and Mosques: A Guide to the Appreciation of Religious Architecture* (Bath, England: Pitman Press, 1982), pp. 90-91.

an architectural type had been used for many years, it was nearly obsolete in the Roman world. Moreover, “the basilica was untainted by any prior religious associations” being a “familiar, all-purpose building type for housing any large assembly of persons.” Moreover, its “ceremonial connotations” were well-suited to the public rituals of the newly-public Christians. Finally, it was relatively easy to build and decorate with materials readily available almost anywhere.¹⁵

According to Richard Krautheimer, the association of the basilica as a king’s hall made the building type all the more attractive to Christians’ emerging theology of Christ as King.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the popularity of the choice of the basilica for church-building may have resulted from Constantinian policy in the years following the Edict of Milan.

It was based on standard forms of monumental public architecture at Rome. Derived from civil halls, imperial palaces or classical hypostyle architecture, it was self-consciously adapted to the new social position of the Christian church under imperial patronage.¹⁷

Patronage by the emperor Constantine and his mother Helena Augusta accounted for a number of these buildings throughout Rome and the Holy Land.¹⁸ Although it underwent some variation and elaboration, the basilica remained the norm for church construction in western Europe for over 1,000 years.¹⁹

Church buildings fell into distinct groups: one type was adapted for common liturgical uses including Eucharist and Mass, while others were designed for the special functions of housing tombs, martyria,²⁰ or baptisteries, which might incorporate, for example, a dome, octagon, hexagon or other polygon.²¹

¹⁵ WARD-PERKINS, p. 325.

¹⁶ KRAUTHEIMER, p. 41.

¹⁷ WHITE, p. 18.

¹⁸ WHITE, p. 4.

¹⁹ DAVIES, p. 101.

²⁰ Martyria are specialized churches specifically built to hold the relics of one believed to have died in the defense or service of Christianity. Frequently, such relics were interred below the altar.

²¹ DAVIES, p. 101-102. Octagons and hexagons were favored for baptisteries and martyria due to their associations with the eight or sixth day of the week, corresponding to Sunday (when Christ rose from the dead) or Friday (when he was crucified), both days considered significant to baptism or martyrdom. A dome was thought to represent an image of heaven.

Ultimately, the construction of the martyrium came to influence that of the baptistery.²² The presence of a baptistery indicated that the church was the seat of a bishop.

Occasionally, the placement of two churches side-by-side demonstrated the differing functions attributed to them. While one church might function in straightforward congregational worship (and might include a baptistery), the other beside it might be set aside for services commemorating the dead, and particularly martyrs.²³ Milburn notes that this Christian practice, influenced by pagan feasts for the dead, might include both Eucharist and community supper.²⁴ As such, both churches were equipped for Masses (each having an altar),²⁵ as one church would celebrate Eucharist for the sake of the living, and the other, on behalf of the dead.

The Basilica at Evraiocastro

Outside of the city walls, towards the cape of Thasos is a terrace bearing a paleo-Christian church. Inside a central nave of this ancient basilica is the recently-constructed Chapel of the Holy Apostles. The ancient basilica, dating

²² A. KHATCHATRIAN, *Origine et Typologie des Baptistères Paleochrétiens* (Mulhouse: Centre de Culture Chrétienne, 1982), p. 13. “La parenté de form entre mausolée, martyrium et baptistère est frappante.” “The relationship of form between mausoleum, martyrium and baptistery is striking” [my translation]. Khatchatrian concludes that the mausoleum and the martyrium influenced the formation of the baptistery because of a perceived confluence of theological meaning: each was regarded as celebrating a particular kind of victory over sin and death. See also “Baptême,” in the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique du Christianisme Ancien* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), pp. 332-338, which describes the similarities in iconography regarding baptism and burial in the early church.

²³ Churches set aside solely for commemoration of rites for the dead are sometimes called cemetery churches, to distinguish them from martyria, which, although they venerate a martyr, usually also celebrated liturgies for the living. The practice of setting aside some, usually small churches, as cemetery churches to be used solely for funerary rites, continues to this day in some parts of the world, including Greece.

²⁴ MILBURN, p. 88-89.

²⁵ Karen Ilene Peterson HENRICKS, *The Early Christian Double-Basilica*. A doctoral dissertation for the University of Missouri-Columbia, 1989 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 16.

from the 5th or perhaps the 6th century CE, includes a narthex and a nave divided into three sections. In the early 1950s, heavy rains revealed the outline of the ruined basilica walls. However, as archeologist Georges Daux angrily reports, complete excavation of the basilica was hindered by “the most offensive”²⁶ construction of the Chapel of the Holy Apostles in 1959 on the site. The construction was without the authorization of the Service Des Antiquités, but, as Daux reports, was financed by Madame Niarchos, presumably a wealthy, private sponsor. This chapel was constructed just before excavations of the underlying basilica could take place, and itself prevents complete excavation of the site. The Chapel of the Holy Apostles occupies all of the choir of the ancient basilica, and used bits of the basilica in the construction of its walls.²⁷

The basilica was built in the 5th century CE, partially restored in the second half of the 6th century and then abandoned, but the date at which it was finally destroyed is not known. The late 6th century repair is dated by a coin of Justinian, found in the repair, touching the foundation of the baptistery. By the 12th century CE, the basilica is known to have already been ruined. Ducat believes that the destruction of the building may have been the result of Slavic invasions, but no specific dates or evidence are offered to buttress this supposition.

The basilica is in nearly complete ruins except at the west angle where a wall remains. It sits on a platform oriented east to west, with a west-side access. The platform measures 23.15 meters east to west and 14 meters north to south. At the northeast end of the nave, a row of benches was partially preserved. To the west, part of one of the stylobates which divided the nave into three parts is visible. To the east, the semicircular apse is also visible. A structure identified in several sources as a circular baptistery can be accessed only through the narthex. However, this structure is unlikely to have been a baptistery, and was more likely

²⁶ Georges DAUX, “Chronique des Fouilles et Découvertes Archéologiques en Grèce en 1963,” *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* (Athens: École Française d’Athènes, 1964,) p. 866. He describes the new building as “la plus offensante.”

²⁷ The chapel highlights a persistent difficulty in archeology: that of competing claims for land. The chapel is just the latest building on the site. However, preserving the chapel means preventing the excavation of the basilica, just as preserving the basilica means preventing the full excavation of the terrace and sanctuary beneath it. Archeologists and others must decide what to excavate and what to preserve amidst competing interests, priorities and even funding sources.

a watchtower.²⁸

All around the building, a cemetery from the 5th or 6th century occupies every available space. About 40 of these graves have been excavated.²⁹ Graves first began to be dug at the site at the same time that the church was built. Then, centuries later, perhaps the 12th century CE, two carefully constructed, but juxtaposed tombs were added to the north end of the narthex at about the same time that another tomb was placed in the watchtower. These tombs have been dated by glass fragments found inside of them.

In general, the basilica appears to have been constructed with little care. The foundation was composed of a gray and crumbly mortar. The walls are covered with gray stucco and decorations are poor and few. (Mosaics, which were common in basilicas of this period, are apparently absent here.)

This early Christian church was built on the site of an earlier, pre-Christian sanctuary which was itself built upon a rocky platform extending to an artificial terrace wall, which resembles that of other buildings near the Acropolis inside the city walls. This earlier sanctuary, and the terrace upon which it is built, are believed to date from the end of the 6th century BCE. About fifty years after

²⁸ See for example, Fernande DUCAT, "La Basilique d'Evraïocastro A Thasos," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* (Athens: École Français d'Athènes, 1965), p. 145, for an identification of this structure as a baptistery. Nevertheless, Charalambos Bakirtzis, Ephor of Byzantine Antiquities of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace for the Greek government, believes that the structure is actually the remnant of the foundation of a guard tower. The point of Evraïocastro, geographically, is an excellent location for the placement of a watch tower. (In addition, several such towers dot the city walls.) Moreover, the extramural placement of the basilica, the poor quality of the construction, the absence of mosaics or other ornamentation, and the preponderance of graves everywhere, which date from the building of the basilica onward, make the presence of baptistery highly unlikely here. Upon examination of the site, I concur with Bakirtzis in his appraisal of the structure as a tower placement rather than a baptistery.

²⁹ *Guide de Thasos* (Paris: École Français d'Athènes, 1967), p. 49. This figure conflicts with DUCAT, p. 153. However, the later publication date of the *Guide de Thasos* and the likelihood that there were many graves at the site make the higher figure quoted here seem reliable. See also Fernande DUCAT, "La Basilique d'Evraïocastro A Thasos," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* (Athens: École Français d'Athènes, 1965), p. 153.

this initial construction, the terrace was enlarged. An extant retaining wall 27 meters in length and 2 meters thick supports the terrace. In that area, terra cotta figurines and inscriptions attest to cults of Zeus, Athena, Artemis, and the Nymphs. Additional inscriptions attest worship of the *patroi*, or ancestor cults to which all Thasian citizens traced their lineage. A small cache of bronze coins dating from the Hellenistic period helps date the site. Also found was an antefixe representing two lions facing one another. Another archaic antefix bears a Chimera identical to one found on an antefix at the Herakleion located inside the city walls. In general, however, George Daux judges the ceramics from the site to be of mediocre quality.³⁰

The lack of fragments datable to the 1st century BCE through the 3rd century CE strongly suggest that the pre-Christian sanctuary fell into disuse during that period. In the first half of the 3rd century CE, the sanctuary was extended to the south with the installation of a portico with a colonnade façade which opened toward the sea. A roof with big antéfixes (with palmettes and wreathes framing a helmeted head of Athena) found on the site are believed to belong to this portico. The portico had tiles of gneiss and marble and a gneiss foundation which bore the stylobate.

Examination of the site reveals human remains almost everywhere, including in the area of the watchtower. While the terra cotta of the tower suggests a 5th century CE date, the glass fragments found with the two tombs in the narthex provide a 12th century CE date for them as well as the tomb in the tower. The profusion of graves, which began to be dug at the same time the church was built, and the extra-mural location of the basilica itself, would seem to suggest that Evraiocastro was a cemetery church. Moreover, that the tombs *within* the basilica proper date to a period centuries after the initial construction mitigates against identifying the church as a martyrion, since the martyr's relics would have been expected to have been centrally-located in the basilica at about the time of its construction. That many of the graves appear to be contemporaneous with the building of the church, seems to support the contention that the church was built for the purpose of commemorating and burying the dead. A baptistery would be highly unlikely in either a cemetery church or martyrion, which tends to confirm the re-identification of the structure originally called a baptistery as a watchtower. In general, the basilica appears to have been hastily constructed and then abandoned at an unknown, later date for unknown rea-

³⁰ DAUX, p. 868.

sons. Evidence suggests that the pre-Christian sanctuary upon which the basilica is built fell into disuse between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE.³¹

This cemetery church, built for the purpose of hallowing Christian dead, was intentionally built upon a site previously used for the veneration of several gods as well as ancestors, or *patroi*. Because Thasos continued to be a wealthy community, it is unlikely that the site was reused for economic reasons. Instead, the Christians of Thasos selected this location, particularly because of its association with the veneration of the dead *patroi*.

The Twin Basilicas at Alikí

Elsewhere on Thasos on the southern peninsula of the island at Alikí,³² double basilicas (built around 500 CE) replaced earlier archaic sanctuaries (built around 500 BCE). Although it is not clear what remained of the earlier sanctuaries at Alikí during the period of the construction of the double basilicas, the replication on the site of double buildings suggests that the practice of replacing sanctuaries with basilicas (as had also occurred at Evraiocastro) was not unusual on the island. First of all, double buildings are unusual in Thrace; therefore, the construction of double basilicas on a site previously occupied by double sanctuaries is, if you will, *doubly* significant. Second, even if the earlier sanctuaries at Alikí and Evraiocastro were in disuse or even ruins at the time of the later Christian construction, evidence such as terra cotta figurines would have marked the location of the sanctuaries.

Alikí was the location of several very profitable marble quarries; it was a center of commerce and shipping. Archeological excavations of caves at Alikí reveal terra cotta figurines dating to the 7th century BCE, indicating the worship of several deities.³³ These finds confirm that the region was regarded as a sacred site for many centuries. Two pre-Christian sanctuaries near the quarries were believed by Bent (on the basis of inscriptional evidence) to have served the worship of Apollo, Athena and Dionysus.³⁴ However, later excavators con-

³¹ Why then did the inhabitants of Thasos return to the site to construct a portico centuries after the sanctuary had apparently been abandoned?

³² Alikí means "salt." At the marble quarries surrounding the settlement, inhabitants gathered salt that precipitated from the ocean onto the stones of the quarry.

³³ "Grotte," *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellenique* 86:2 (1962), pp. 949-959.

³⁴ J. Th. BENT, "The Temple of Apollo at Alikí," *American Journal of Archeology* 3 (1887), pp. 450-452.

cluded that these buildings were actually sanctuaries to Poseidon.³⁵ Today, the actual deity, or deities worshipped at the site is a point of speculation: some have suggested that the two sanctuaries served complementary divines, as was the case in Dodoni, where both Zeus and his wife, Dione, were worshipped in twin sanctuaries. Others have posited Poseidon, Dionysus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Artemis or Athena as those among the pantheon who were worshipped there.

The two sanctuaries, labeled “North” and “South” for purposes of easy identification by Servais, each form almost perfect squares, and are in many ways, classical examples of archaic architecture. For example, both buildings featured shallow porticos (similar to the *oikoi* complex of the Thasian Herakeion) rather than the developed stoas of later architectural vogue. Both buildings are composed of two rooms of unequal size. The North building, which is the older of the two, is believed to have been built around 525 BCE and partially remodeled about 450 BCE, perhaps to unify it architecturally with the South building. The South building dates to about 500 BCE and is thought to have been built to complement the North building, although it is smaller and simpler in comparison. The buildings are believed to have been in use until the late Roman period. The South sanctuary was found to contain pottery fragments datable to the 1st and 2nd century CE.³⁶ Little remains of the two archaic sanctuaries today. Of the Ionic portico, only a couple of column bases remain in situ. (In a typical reuse of spoils, a nearby house incorporated an identical column base, presumably from the site, in the building of one of its walls.)

Nearby but not contiguous to the ruins of the ancient, pre-Christian sanctuaries, Aliko bears twin basilicas. Of these two buildings, the northernmost was built upon the remains of an earlier, pre-Christian cultic site datable to the 1st century CE,³⁷ and a very simple Christian chapel which antedated the pre-Christian building. However, opinion is divided as to which of the basilicas, North or South, was built first.

As noted earlier, double basilicas were not uncommon throughout the Mediterranean basin, although they were quite unusual in the immediate vicinity of Thrace. Frequently, the two buildings served different liturgical functions.

³⁵ J. SERVAIS, Aliko I: Les Deux Sanctuaires; Études Thasiennes IX. (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, L'École Française d'Athènes, 1980), p. 9.

³⁶ SERVAIS, p. 71.

³⁷ J.-P. SODINI, Aliko II: La Basilique Double. Études Thasiennes (L'École Française d'Athènes, Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1984), p. 9.

This was also the case at Alikí: the southernmost of double basilicas at Alikí was also believed to possess a baptistery, while the northernmost basilica probably served as a cemetery church or perhaps martyrium.

Lacking any evidence of an altar, the northern basilica is filled with burial remains. However, unlike other double basilicas elsewhere, the geography of the site at Alikí dictates that the two churches are built very close together, in a somewhat awkward manner.

The Significance of Hero Worship on Thasos

Hero worship was particularly strong and enduring on Thasos, as evidenced by the centrality of the Herakleion and monuments to Glaukos and Theagenes. As early as the late bronze age, “the concept of the hero or tribal ancestor developed and was linked with beliefs in an afterlife.”³⁸ As we noted earlier, the basilica at Evraiocastro was built upon an earlier sanctuary dedicated (by inscription evidence) to several Olympian gods and to the *patroi*, or ancestor cults to which the citizens of the island traced their lineage.

The Herakleion on Thasos was, in fact, the largest Herakleion in the ancient world. Both Kobayashi and Kurtz note that the cult of Herakles on Thasos incorporated elements of worship traditionally attributed not only to a hero, but to an Olympian god. While Kurtz resists concluding that this atypical hero-cult resulted from syncretism between Greek and Phoenician deities, Kobayashi, reading the same sources, is not so sure.³⁹ Kobayashi details the conflation of Herakles with the Phoenician deity, Melqart, as evidence of syncretism. However, for the purposes of our study, we need only note the centrality of Herak-

³⁸ HODDINOTT, Ralph, “The Hero in Thracian Religion,” in *The Thracians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), pp. 169-175. See also Cynthia STEGER’s unpublished Archeology seminar paper, “Heroes and Martyrs: Christianity in the Agora at Thasos,” Harvard Divinity School, April 1993.

³⁹ Mark KURTZ, “HPOΣ ΘΕΟΣ: Preliminary Remarks on the Cult of Herakles on Thasos,” unpublished Archeology seminar paper, Harvard Divinity School, May 1997, and Leslie KOBAYASHI, “The Herakleion at Thasos,” unpublished Archeology seminar paper, Harvard Divinity School, April 27, 1987. Both authors draw upon ancient sources by Pausanias and Herodotus for contemporaneous references to ancient practices in the Thasian Herakleion. However, Kurtz’s conclusion that the Herakles cult on Thasos was Greek in practice, and lacked significant foreign influence, seems unconvincing to me.

lean worship on Thasos, and the attribution of some characteristics of worship of the divine with the worship of Herakles.

For the Thasians, Herakles represented a connection between their glorious past – because of his association with their myth of origin⁴⁰ – and with the Olympian gods, through his association with Zeus, his father. In a way, Herakles worship functioned like the *patroi*, or ancestor cults to which all Thasian citizens traced their lineage, by linking each individual worshipper both to the heroic past and to the prosperous and hopeful present that Thasos enjoyed. The monuments to the local heroes, Glaukos and Theagenes, may have served a similar function.

Milburn argues that Christian veneration of martyrs was strongly influenced by the pagan cult of hero-worship.⁴¹ Certainly, on Thasos, where hero-worship was so central that it was associated with the island's myths of origin, and where the largest sanctuary was dedicated to a hero/god, Herakles, this was certainly the case. On Thasos, the veneration of martyrs, and respect for the Christian dead, generally, was certainly influenced by hero cult, as the location of the basilica on Evraiocastro demonstrates.

Moreover, elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, evidence of Christian appropriations of earlier hero sites abound. At Philippi, beneath the floor of the Octagonal⁴² church, is an inscription from an older building which includes the words “the basilica of Paul,” and the name of one “Bishop Porphyrius,” whose tenure is datable to 342-344 CE, just after the Edict of Milan. Beneath all this was an ancient heroon, consisting of an underground crypt, temple, and sacred grove, which were located in the center of Philippi. Porphyrius secured permission to build a Christian church directly over the hero's crypt in the 4th century CE. This building was later replaced by the more elaborate Octagonal church, but the earlier inscriptions to Paul and Porphyrius were uncovered by careful excavation.⁴³

⁴⁰ As we noted earlier, local legend linked Herakles with the founding father, Telesikles, in the colonization of Thasos.

⁴¹ MILBURN, p. 94.

⁴² As we have noted earlier, this shape is often associated with martyria and baptisteries. In this case, the church appears to commemorate some hero – perhaps the civic hero interred below it—or perhaps the Apostle Paul, spoken about by an early inscription preserved in the floor.

⁴³ Charalambos BAKIRTZIS and Helmut KOESTER, *Philippi at the Time of Paul and*

According to Cynthia Steger, Thasos was very tolerant of religious diversity. Although the cult of Dionysus functioned there well into the Christian era, “there is no mention of any anti-Christian persecution on Thasos... Because of its long history of occupation by many different cultures, as well as its location on a main trade route from Asia Minor to Macedonia, it welcomed many diverse religions.”⁴⁴ As in Philippi, Christians in Thasos were willing – even eager – to re-use earlier pagan sites, given their tolerance towards religious difference.

Is it possible that there any relationship between the earliest designation of the basilica of Evraiocastro as a place of worship and veneration of the *patroi* and its later use as a place of Christian burial? I believe that, just as Porphyrius sought out the earlier heroon as a church location (probably in an attempt to appropriate the prestige and civic virtue associated with it) so the Christians of Thasos sought the ancient site of *patroi* worship for burial of their esteemed dead: Evraiocastro. As such, the building of the basilica at Evraiocastro represents not a type of hostile takeover, but a type of invention of tradition,⁴⁵ link-

After His Death (Wipf & Stock, 2009). I once had occasion to visit this site, guided by Charalambos Bakirtzis and Helmut Koester. I climbed down into the crypt, and was able to see the ground-level inscriptions mentioning both Paul and Porphyrius. In the volume edited by Bakirtzis and Koester, the significance of traditions linking Paul and Philippi are more thoroughly explored. However, at the site, Helmut Koester did outline parts of his, and others’ theories which link the site of the Octagonal church to early traditions (as hinted at in the Epistle to the Philippians) suggesting that Paul was martyred in that city rather than in Rome, as other traditions affirm. However, for our purposes, it is enough to note that the site of the Octagonal church represents a major Christian re-appropriation of a preexisting site of civic hero-worship, which was subsequently associated with Christian worship, and perhaps even with the pre-eminent figure of early Christianity, the Apostle Paul.

⁴⁴ STEGER, p. 1; R. J. L. Wynne-Thomas, *Legacy of Thasos* (London: Springwood Books, 1978), p. 83; Christiane Dunant and J. Pouilloux, *Recherches sur L’Histoire et les Cultes de Thasos II (de 196 av J.-C. a la fin de Antiquite) Études Thasiennes V. L’École Français d’Athènes* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1957), p. 183.⁴⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of the “Invention of Tradition” school, see for example, Eric HOBBSAWM, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 1-14.

⁴⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of the “Invention of Tradition” school, see for example, Eric HOBBSAWM, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Inven-*

ing the Christian era with the revered (and mythic) past of heroes and ancestors on the island,⁴⁶ in effect creating a new genre of heroes of the Christian dead.

Reuse of Sacred Sites as Evidence of Religious Syncretism

As Stewart and Shaw note, “syncretism is a feature of all religions.” However, syncretism is also “a contentious term”—a weapon wielded polemically, to suggest that a religion has become inauthentic or “contaminated” by contact with others—and, thus, in many minds, a thing to be avoided.⁴⁷ As the example of the evolution of the basilica as an architectural form suggests, early Christianity was receiving, repudiating and denying influences from all over: from Judaism, from the Roman empire, and from its own internal resources and theologies. Questions of sources and resources become very complicated in the sort of polyvalent culture which the Greco-Roman world represented. Often, the question is complicated by the competing groups’ competing claims for authority on the basis of invented or implied continuity with an imagined past. As the Invention of Tradition School would suggest, the stakes are very high for those groups seeking validation on the basis of their continuity with the past. Moreover, for those invested in the paradigm which equates syncretism with decay and contamination, much energy is often expended in denying the influence of one religion over another.

tion of Tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 1-14.

⁴⁶ Unlike at Alikī, where a significant period of time elapsed between the last use of the double sanctuaries, and the first use of the double basilicas, worship at Evraio-castro appears to have been nearly continuous. The last construction on the pre-existing pagan sanctuary at the site was the 3rd century CE. The basilica was built in the 5th century, CE. Although it is impossible to close the archeological time gap by more than these two centuries, the basilica at Evraio-castro is built directly upon the pre-existing sanctuary. Its existence must have been known to the surrounding community. Consequently, it is much more plausible to posit a re-use of this sacred site than that of Alikī, which was clearly unoccupied for a very long time.

⁴⁷ Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, “Introduction” in *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1, 5.

The perplexing construction of double basilicas just south of double sanctuaries at Alikí suggests that the Christians of Thasos were doing more than conserving money by building near to ancient foundations where they could reuse marble or other spoils. If the point were cost-cutting, building one basilica at Alikí would have sufficed. It is quite possible to view the building of the double basilicas at Alikí, near the remains of double pagan sanctuaries, as a Christian appropriation of pre-Christian historical traditions. As such, the site may evidence a Christian community which did not regard contact with the pagan past as an unmitigated evil.

Archeological evidence from the period between the 2nd century CE, when the pagan sanctuaries fell into disuse, and the 5th century CE, when the Christian basilicas were built, is scant at best. What evidence of the previous double sanctuaries survived into the period of the double basilicas? What traditions about the site were being circulated among the populace? These are questions archeology has yet to answer. Clearly, the double sanctuaries were unoccupied, and perhaps in ruins for a very long time. As a result, it is difficult to do more than speculate, based upon the circumstantial evidence of the double construction, that the basilicas at Alikí were influenced by the double sanctuaries built there centuries earlier. However, the double basilicas at Alikí are located a short distance from the double sanctuaries. It is, therefore, possible that the later double construction is unrelated to the earlier one. On the other hand, the basilica at Evraïocastro is built directly upon the foundations and terrace of the earlier sanctuaries which it postdates, which suggests that the earlier sanctuary must have been known by the basilica-builders.

The concepts of the nature of worship differed dramatically between pagans and Christians. In the pre-Christian period, the emphasis was upon *duty* in the performance of worship, while early Christian thought began to emphasize *belief* as a central element of worship. Continuous use of sacred sites does not begin to suggest that the worship at those sites remains identical. Indeed, as Herskovits notes in his description of the concept of *syncretism*, cultural contact between groups may produce results along a “continuum that stretched from situations where items from two or more cultures in contact had been fully merged to those situations where there was the unchanged retentions of pre-existing ones.”⁴⁸ Consequently, continued worship at a site might represent *re-*

⁴⁸ Melville J. HERSKOVITS, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1990 [1941]), p. xxxvi.

tention and/or *reinterpretation* of that which had occurred there previously.

For Herskovits, cultural contact between competing groups can produce new cultural artifacts which must be understood in the context of the contact which produced them. “Under contact, a new form can be accorded a value that has a functioning role into which it can be readily fitted; or an old form can be assimilated into a new one.”⁴⁹ At Evraioastro, the reuse of the earlier sacred site associated with the *patroi*, among others, may have represented the retention and reinterpretation of civic virtue and ancestor cult by Christians as a means of achieving respectability, or even a connection with the legendary past of the community, as a similar practice at Philippi suggested. At Aliko, the long period between the last use of the site as a pagan sanctuary, and its first use as a Christian basilica, mitigate against a similar interpretation. However, at Aliko, the circumstantial evidence of twin basilicas near twin sanctuaries remains. Why did the builders need two buildings? It is tempting to suggest that a similar, although perhaps more tenuous, appropriation of local tradition is taking place.

Dodds notes that it was the interaction with paganism that resulted in certain Christian emphases upon doctrine and orthodoxy. Similarly, he credits contact with Christianity with “the transformation of Neoplatonism into a religion with its own saints and miracle-workers.”⁵⁰ However, Dodds paints a startlingly antagonistic picture, and one which certainly prevailed in some parts of the empire, of competing ideologies locked in a battle in which each fears for its very existence. According to Mara Schiffren, Krautheimer notes a chronological distance between the reuse of pagan sites for Christian buildings in various parts of the Greco-Roman world. In the East, Christian churches were built upon pagan sites as early as the 4th century CE; in the West, due to the strong Christian polemic against pagan religions, such buildings did not appear until the 6th century CE.⁵¹ Thasos island, towards the eastern end of the Roman empire, was part of a region where pagan-Christian tensions were less-intense than elsewhere in the empire.

Thasos island presents an alternative possibility—the possibility of a region which, by virtue of its wide-ranging trading interests, had been exposed to many different religious practices, and in which divergent religious practices

⁴⁹ HERSKOVITS, p. xxxvii.

⁵⁰ E. R. DODDS, “The Dialogue of Paganism with Christianity,” in *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 109.

⁵¹ SCHIFFREN, p. 2; KRAUTHEIMER, p. 19.

were tolerated. Perhaps on Thasos, Christian communities re-appropriated and reinterpreted pagan sites, not in an effort either to conquer them, or to resist being conquered by their adherents, but rather in an effort to identify with the heroic traditions they represented.

Both Comaroff and Meyer note that pre-existing religious beliefs or practices can be preserved after conversion, despite the best efforts of evangelists. According to Meyer, the process of “appropriation” results in “the process of making Christianity one’s own – a process which can even result in the subversion of missionary ideas.”⁵² Meyer’s conclusion, that evangelized peoples bring along with them into their new religion remnants of the old beliefs, is substantiated in Comaroff’s book, a case study of the Barolong boo Ratshidi people of the South Africa-Botswana borderland. Comaroff documents how Protestant evangelists sought to undermine the traditions of the Tshidi, as they are called, and the ways that the Tshidi lifeways have re-asserted themselves, for example, in the Tshidi’s own variation of Christianity, the Zion Christian church.⁵³

Comaroff’s findings suggest that the Tshidi exercised agency in what they retained of their culture. Meyer’s work indicates that, despite the evangelists’ best efforts, something of older beliefs is always carried into any new religious life. For the residents of Thasos, the question of their intent in building the basilicas at Evraiocastro and Alikí must remain for subsequent investigators. Too little is known about the particular practices of that region in that period. Nevertheless, it is impossible to dismiss the conclusion that the re-use of these pagan sites was intentional. Moreover, I am convinced that it was unlikely to have been antagonistic. Instead, the Christians of Thasos sought to appropriate, and perhaps celebrate, the significance of these sites to the island’s past and its myths of origin.

⁵² Birgit MEYER, “Beyond Syncretism: Translation and diabolization in the appropriation of Protestantism in Africa,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. Charles STEWART and Rosalind SHAW, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 45.

⁵³ Jean COMAROFF, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Conclusion

The Christians of Thasos appealed to their mythic, and incidentally, pagan, past, for authority, in a syncretism apparently less problematic for them than it was for other Christians elsewhere in the waning Roman empire. Today, the questions raised by the issues of religious syncretism have not disappeared. Rather, they resurface in subtly altered guises. In Greece, today, the government (which oversees archeological activity, holding ancient sites in civic trust) is in conflict with the Greek Orthodox church, which seeks to re-inhabit basilicas and rotundas which were once sacred property. As in the case of the construction of the Chapel of the Holy Apostles on the archeological site of the basilica of Evraiocastro, competing interests are locked in conflict. It is not only the use of the site that is at stake; cultural values are being contested here. In the current battle between the Greek government and the Greek church, it is the relative value of on-going worship, versus the relative value of historical preservation, in the national economy and conscience, that forms the contested ground. The winner of this contest will receive not only the huge pot of tourist Euros at stake here, but also the moral high ground of appeal to the mythic past of Greece. As I hope we have proven elsewhere throughout this paper, for some communities, the appeal of a mythic past is an almost irresistible inducement.

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